

THE SPIRIT OF ADVENT 2008

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I

COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN

The beloved season of Advent is now upon us, with its dark, snowy evenings, its deep silence, and its enchanting hymns, filled with Old Testament longing for the coming of the Redeemer into our hearts and world to fill us with splendor and light. We sing during Advent:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! O Israel
To thee shall come Emmanuel!

Advent it is a time of joy to welcome Emmanuel, "God-with-us." How Israel longed for its Redeemer, we can see in the prophets, but what came was far greater than they expected, for in the birth of Christ, Israel was ransomed from its captivity to sorrow and sin. In him truly "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" and "those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined" (Is 9:2).

Israel, who has waited in lonely exile, has now been ransomed by the Son of God. In him, the elect have found their ransom from sin and guilt, to now begin life anew in the light of the Son of God. He came to die for us to ransom us back for God, that we might live in the light, renewed from within, and filled with his splendor and joy. His death is our ransom from death. His life is our new life. The splendor of his resurrection illumines our path. He has paid the penalty for our sin in his death, and so he is our ransom from the darkness of guilt. His coming brings us new hope and light, and illumines us from within, filling us with new-found joy in the Holy Spirit, whom he sends to us from the Father, to whom he ascended in glory after triumphing over sin on the cross.

It all begins with his birth in a manger, in a stable in Bethlehem. Here the Son of God appeared for the first time in the world. He wrapped himself in human flesh, and thereby illumined it from within with his own glorious light. His flesh is our flesh. We are all

connected by a common human flesh on this night made radiant by a heavenly light. His elect, who believe in him, are filled with this light, a light not of this world, for this is why he came, that our darkness might be turned into light, our captivity to sin ransomed back, our exile from God ended, and our union with him completed. In him, God is with us, and we are made new, a new creation, filled with light, our steps illumined by the light of his resurrection. He has made us sons of God, and heirs with him to a heavenly kingdom.

During Advent we long for his coming. We long for his parousia, when he will come on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory, when “he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call” to “gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Mt 24:31). It is for this coming that we now prepare ourselves. But we also long with Israel to be ransomed from our lonely exile here, to be filled with all the fullness of God, which the Son of God has come to bring us.

In our waiting and prayer along with Israel, we experience the same longing they did, and we long together with them, using their divinely inspired words and images, as we await a deeper coming of the Lord to fill us with his heavenly light and a peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7). In the liturgy, in our prayer, in our worship, in our adoration, and in the eucharist, he comes to us. The Lord comes. We are the new Israel, to whom shall come Emmanuel. Therefore we rejoice as we wait, and as he comes. Advent is a time of coming, of receiving the Son of God who comes to bring us great light.

How the earth was changed by the birth of the Son of God in the manger in Bethlehem, surrounded by singing angels and adoring shepherds! How this night has changed history! No longer is God distant from us. He has become incarnate in the body of this infant lying in the hay in the manger. Henceforth, for those who believe in him, he is God-with-us. He is within us, for we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus, born on this most holy night. We consume his flesh and drink his blood, so that his divine life might be in us and divinize us. We remain human, of course, but the sanctifying, divinizing life of God incarnate is now within us, transforming us into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus Christ was born to transform the earth into the Kingdom of God, into a new creation. “Behold,” he says, “I make all things new” (Rev 21:5).

This is, therefore, a splendid season, a time of grace and transformation, a time of splendor and light, a time of renewal and recreation, a time of joy and welcoming of the Son of God to the earth.

Advent is a time when we prepare our hearts for all these comings, that when he comes, as come he will, we will be ready, and he will find us prepared and eagerly awaiting him in purity and prayer, in adoration and joyful expectation. So now we watch and wait for the day, cleansing ourselves of sin through the merits of Christ’s death on the cross, that he may find us ready to welcome him with joy.

Besides all this, says St. Paul,

...you know the time, that it is now the hour for you to wake from sleep, for our salvation is now nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Let us then put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us walk becomingly as in the day, not in gluttony and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the

Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Rom 13:11-14).

We are moving toward that time now. Each day brings us closer to our final salvation. It should also make us more worthy, more ready to receive it. We must sleep no longer, deceiving ourselves amid the pleasures of this world, the pleasures of the flesh, which cloud the mind, weigh down the spirit, and make our hearts forgetful of God. Advent is the time to wake up, to renew ourselves in the Lord. Jesus also tells us,

...take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with gluttony and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man (Lk 21:34-36).

That day will come. We are to be watching and praying for it, that it may find us ready, detached from the worldly pleasures that weigh us down, divide our hearts, and make us incapable of experiencing the subtle sweetness of the Lord's presence in our hearts.

The day is already at hand, St. Paul tells us. The night of this present old age is already far spent. The dawning of the day of salvation and fullness of redemption is at hand. Let us clothe ourselves then with Jesus Christ, and not let the desires of the flesh and the delights of this world lead us. Rather, we are to be "sons of light and sons of the day," for "we are not of the night or of darkness" (1 Thess 5:5). You are to confide ever more in the merits of Jesus Christ, "so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess 3:13). Only the merits of the death of Christ on the cross can do this for us, making us "blameless in holiness before God...at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess 3:13).

This is the blessed day that we now await, when Jesus Christ will return with all his saints and angels in great glory and power; and in that day there will be a great light (Zech 14:6). That is the light and the day that we now live for and prepare ourselves for, that renewed by the death of Christ, who has made us a new creation in his propitiatory and expiatory death, suffering the punishment due for our sins in our place, we might even now be "blameless in holiness before our God and Father" (1 Thess 3:13), and continue to grow in this purity and blamelessness right up unto "the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess 3:13).

It will be Jesus Christ who will sustain us blameless unto the day of his coming. Indeed, says St. Paul, "you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:7-8). This is certainly not something we ourselves can do for ourselves. Only Christ can do it for us, and this work of his is already under way. He cleanses us from our sins and makes us righteous, taking our sins upon himself, so that we might be righteous in him with his righteousness. Indeed "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). And so when he returns he will find us ready if we remain faithfully united to him, ever renewing ourselves again in his justifying grace should we fall into sin or imperfections, and ever bringing forth the

fruits of our justification in a holy and blameless life. In this way he will find us ready, “blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints” (1 Thess 3:13).

Therefore “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). This is our Advent goal, our Advent program, to be ever more sanctified by God, cooperating with his justifying grace in Christ and bearing the fruits of our justification in good works, growing each day more, coming ever closer to our goal of holiness of life, right up to the day of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. May our preparation now make us ready “when the Lord is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire...when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and be marveled at in all who have believed” (2 Thess 1:7,10).

Advent, then, is a time of quiet inner joy and moderation, when we seek to be near to the Lord who is near to us. We do not want to expel him from our hearts by loud talking and motions, but rather we are to preserve a quiet and peaceful demeanor and manner of living, letting our moderation be known to all, for the Lord is near (Phil 4:5). Advent should, therefore, be a time of much silence and quiet, of peaceful, reflective, and prayerful work, rejoicing in our hearts, recollected within ourselves, and ever awaiting that gift which is the peace of God that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7). Advent is a time of silent, peaceful joy, of quiet rejoicing in the Lord. It is a time when we want to guard silence more strictly than usual, and treasure our silent and solitary hours of quiet, peaceful work before the Lord in a spirit of prayer, for at this time “the Lord is near” (Phil 4:5).

St. Paul, therefore, tells us during Advent,

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known to all men. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:4-7).

Advent then is a time of joy and moderation, of quiet, silent joy in the Lord.

II

PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Advent is also the time when we go out into the desert with John the Baptist, to let him teach us how to prepare the way of the Lord. The desert is the place where we empty ourselves of the pleasures of this world, to make our hearts ready for God, ready for his coming into us in a richer and fuller way. The desert was the place chosen by God finally to prepare his people for his coming; and the one he sent to proclaim this preparation was a desert dweller, John the Baptist, an ascetic, dressed in camel’s skins, with a leather girdle about his waist, who ate locusts and wild honey (Mk 1:6). John was certainly not a man clothed in soft garments (Mt 11:8). Although he was sent by God to introduce the King of the Universe to his people, and to prepare Israel to receive him, he did not live in

the palace of a king (Mt 11:8), but rather in a desert cave, clothed in animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey. He came as a penitent, a renunciant, an ascetic, a desert dweller, who lived far from human habitation. He lived alone in a barren landscape, in silence and solitude.

During Advent we go into the desert with John, to find the Lord, to be forgiven for our sins, and cleansed of our guilt through repentance and by calling on the name and merits of Jesus' death on the cross with faith, especially in the sacrament of reconciliation, which gives us so much peace, precisely because it sacramentally channels the merits of Christ's death on the cross personally and individually to us (Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23). Here then in the desert, we lay down our burden and are cleansed and prepared for the coming of the Lord. We prepare in the desert the way of the Lord.

Here we also take on a desert way of life, which is a contemplative way of living, a life focused solely on the Lord, renouncing the pleasures and delights of this world, for the sake of the greatest delight of all, the light of Christ shining in our hearts (2 Cor 4:6), illumining us from within. In the city, in the world, it is difficult to perceive the subtle joy and sweetness of our new life in Christ. We need to be far from its endless, superficial conversations, diversions, delights, noise, distractions, and entertainments, to hear the still, silent voice of the Lord speaking to our hearts, as Elijah heard it in the desert at Mount Sinai.

And here is John in the desert of Judea, by the Jordan,

...a voice crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God (Lk 3:4-6; Is 40:3-5).

Here we see the desert transformed, becoming a vast plain, smooth and easy cross, where all flesh shall behold together the salvation of our God. Here is the desert, a place of dryness, lacking all the pleasures of life; yet it is a place of heavenly manifestation, of brilliant light in its emptiness and plainness. With only locusts and wild honey to eat, one rejoices all the more in heavenly delights, for our senses and heart is not divided and distracted by other attractions. Wearing rough and rude animal skins, one is clothed in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14). Lacking human society, one is filled all the more with the fullness of God. No wonder the desert has always been the place of predilection for monks seeking after God, longing to live in his light and inner radiance.

Are we surprised then that God chose the desert as the place to prepare Israel for his coming into their midst? And we, who do not live in an actual desert, nonetheless spend Advent in the desert with John, preparing the way of the Lord, living simply and in much silence and solitude. It is when we go to the desert to prepare with John the way of the Lord that we find every valley exalted and filled in so we can easily cross them, and every mountain and hill made low for us to pass over them. See how God transforms the harshness and difficulty of the desert for us, and allows all who come there in faith to see the glory of the Lord. The desert shall then be transformed for us, becoming a place of revelation and divine presence, of inner joy and heavenly light, and of the peace that passes all understanding; in short, a place of heavenly manifestation.

And "the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (Is 40:4 KJV). The uninhabitable land shall become for us the place of the habitation of God with his

people. It shall become our Advent abode, our dwelling place with the Lord, our hideaway in the wilderness, our place of inner transformation. The desert is the home of our spirit during Advent. It is there that we go to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord. It is there that we will find our peace with God in union with him. During Advent, we become desert dwellers. We become an Advent people, people of the desert, people who live with God in simplicity and moderation, in plainness and austerity, in heavenly manifestations and in a peace not of this world. We are therefore to prepare in the desert the way of the Lord. Thus do we prepare for the Lord's coming into our lives. This is how it is done. This is the way God chose to prepare Israel for his coming: He sent John into the desert to prepare the way. Let us answer this invitation, this desert call, this summons to enter into the peace of the Lord, for now the time of his coming is near. Let us eat locusts and wild honey with John. Let us dress in camel's skins and live in a desert cave. Let us spend our time in silence and solitude, and in heavenly light with God, so that the Lord may come to us and fill us with all the fullness of God.

III

COME LET US ADORE HIM

Advent is a time of longing.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Rejoice! Rejoice! O Israel
To thee shall come Emmanuel!

During Advent we long for a fuller dose of salvation, and we rejoice in that salvation and in Emmanuel, for in him God dwells with us, filling us with heavenly joy and a peace not of this world. In Christ "all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Ps 97:3). We rejoice in this manifestation to the world of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. We rejoice in his righteousness, that has made us resplendent and righteous in his sight. We rejoice in the light that radiates from the new-born infant in Bethlehem. He fills us with light. He is the focus of this season. In him "all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God" (Ps 97:3).

In him "the Father has made you worthy to share the lot of the saints in light" (Col 1:12). We now live in that realm of light in him who unites our nature to his own divine nature to fill us with his light. In him we "share the lot of the saints in light" (Col 1:12). We once walked in darkness, but now we have seen a great light. We once sat in a land of deep darkness, but now the light has shined upon us (Is 9:2). The light shines upon us in this infant. God shines into our hearts in him. By his radiance we are illumined from within.

It is God the Father who has "rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col 1:13). We rejoice now in this Kingdom of

light, this Kingdom of Christ, for “Through him we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins” (Col 1:14). We revel, therefore, in the light, the light in the desert, the light in the darkness of this world, in which we shine as luminaries in the world, for this child has made you “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil 2:15).

We are these lights in the world of darkness, for Christ the Lord, born this day in the city of David (Lk 2:11), has shone upon us, giving us the light of life, for “with him is plenteous redemption, and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” (Ps 129:8). Indeed, in him “all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (Ps 97:3). And we do not tire of this salvation, but are ever renewed by it. It fills us with heavenly peace and light, for only in him are our sins taken away, and only in him does the light of his resurrection dawn upon us.

This is the light in which we now walk. We walk in the light of his countenance, and exult in his name all the day long. His glory is our strength, and in his favor is our horn exalted, as the psalmist prophesies about us:

Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of thy countenance, who exult in thy name all the day, and extol thy righteousness. For thou art the glory of their strength; by thy favor our horn is exalted (Ps 88:15-17).

So, during Advent, we rejoice in the salvation of our Lord and King come into our midst. We long with Israel for it, that is, to have it ever more abundantly, ever more deeply, ever more surely. We long in the words of the prophet Isaiah, saying with all Israel,

Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness: let the earth open, and let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together (Is 45:8 KJV).

And may we rejoice ever more in it, renewed, illumined, and rejoiced by it. Indeed, this righteousness drops down from the heavens above, like dew. It is not ours, but Christ’s. He has come to clothe us with it, in a robe of righteousness, like a bride (Is 61:10). We are to be clothed with Christ (Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14), clothed in the light that streams forth from his resurrection, clothed in splendor. So let this righteousness from above pour down upon us in the birth of this child of light. In him, the earth will open and bring forth salvation. Our nature will be renewed. He will be an interior light in our heart, burning to illumine to world.

In him, the light has come into the the world. We turn to this light during Advent to be illumined by it, to have it shine within us.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising (Is 60:1-3).

This is Christmas morning, filled with glory. A great light has come into the world, and the glory of the Lord shines upon his people. All else is surrounded by darkness; but all are attracted to this light. Deep darkness covers the peoples, but the Lord has arisen upon us, and his splendor is seen within us, illumining our hearts, attracting even kings to our brightness. So we are to both arise and shine, for our light has come. The Son of God is born upon the earth. Let us adore him. We fall down before his manger and are filled with light. He has come to make us new (Rev 21:5), a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), new men (Eph 4:22-24) in Jesus Christ, through his incarnation, death, and resurrection. In him we are illumined. In him is our peace.

This holy night, therefore, shines beyond all other nights with the radiant new light of Christ the Lord, born in the city of David, for the illumination and salvation of his elect. He makes them new. He makes them righteous. He makes them to shine with his own radiant light, newly come into the world this holiest of all nights.

Advent is our fervent preparation for this coming. It is a time of adoration before his crib, for

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore (Is 9:7).

He comes to bring to the earth a Kingdom of righteousness and peace without limit, to rule upon the throne of David forever, to establish it in righteousness for evermore. His Kingdom is to rule over the whole earth, transforming all who accept him in faith, filling them with divine love and heavenly peace, illumining them from within with splendor and light. He makes all things new (Rev 21:5). He makes us new when we believe in him. He fills us with light. He is our peace (Micah 5:5), for “he shall be great to the ends of the earth” (Micah 5:4). Come, let us adore him, and be illumined and made new by him.